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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: VISIT OF VIETNAMESE PRIME MINISTER

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¶1. (U) Summary. Vietnamese PM Dung met Pope Benedict XVI and other senior Holy See officials January 25, the first meeting of its kind. The meeting appears to have gone well and there is hope for full diplomatic relations in the near future. The Holy See has sent a steady stream of important visitors to Vietnam over the years and has been impressed by the improved climate for religious freedom there. The USG decision to remove Vietnam from the list of Countries of Particular Concern helped influence the Vatican's action. End summary.

¶2. (U) Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung met Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican for about half an hour on January 25, the first time any pope had ever received a leader of socialist Vietnam. Dung subsequently met the Holy See's Secretary of State (prime minister-equivalent), Cardinal

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Tarcisio Bertone, and Secretary for Relations with States (i.e., foreign minister) Archbishop Dominique Mamberti. Dung was accompanied by an eight-member delegation which included four ministers and Ngo Yen Thi, head of Vietnam's Commission for Religious Affairs.

Holy See Satisfied

¶3. (U) The Holy See issued a statement after the meeting expressing its satisfaction with the visit, saying that it marked "a new and important step toward the normalization of bilateral relations" and noting that those relations in recent years have made "concrete progress opening new spaces of religious freedom" for the Church in Vietnam. The communique also noted the Holy See's hope that remaining problems would be resolved through existing channels of dialogue, and looked forward to fruitful cooperation between Church and State so that Catholics could make an increasingly effective and positive contribution to the common good of Vietnam -- promoting moral values, spreading a culture of solidarity, and helping the poor. The statement added that opinions were exchanged on the current international situation, with a view to joint commitment for peace and negotiated solutions to serious world problems.

Diplomatic Relations Coming?

¶4. (U) A spokesman for the Vietnamese delegation told the press that the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the Holy See would depend directly on the outcome of the meeting. Journalists present at the public portion of the meeting described the atmosphere as particularly cordial. The archbishop of Ho Chi Minh City, Cardinal Pham Minh Man, predicted that formal diplomatic relations would be established

soon.

Warming Trend in Recent Years

¶5. (U) Pope John Paul II had indicated interest in visiting Vietnam in 1998, but was rebuffed by the government. The Holy See has sent numerous delegations to Vietnam on a regular basis in recent years, including that of Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe in November 2005, during which the cardinal ordained 57 new priests in Hanoi. The absence of a Chinese-style Catholic Patriotic Association in Vietnam facilitated a modus vivendi for the Church, helping to avoid bitter clashes over episcopal nominations. When Pope John Paul died in 2005, the Vatican took note of Vietnam's decision to send condolences from then-Prime Minister Pham Van Khai to Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and also set up viewing facilities in Hanoi for local Catholics to see the funeral.

¶6. (U) The archbishop of Bordeaux, Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard, led a group of French bishops to Vietnam a few weeks ago at the invitation of the Vietnamese bishops' conference. Archbishop Bernard-Nicolas Aubertin of Tours, a member of that group, told Vatican journalists this week that his group had been warmly welcomed by a succession of Vietnamese clergy, and described their meetings as genuinely free and fraternal. Aubertin's visit was his eighth in the past 16 years, and he spoke of "enormous changes" in Vietnam, including authorization for some seminaries to open, restoration of some Church property, and limited permission to build churches and conduct ordinations. While mindful of the distance yet to be traveled, he contrasted Vietnam's dismissive attitude 15 years ago -- when Mother Teresa's offer to send volunteers was curtly rejected -- with today's situation, where religious communities in Vietnam are profoundly involved in helping handicapped people, orphans, and children of lepers.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) Holy See Deputy FM Parolin -- who himself visited Vietnam in May 2004 -- told us recently that the USG's decision

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to remove Vietnam from the annual list of Countries of Particular Concern (for religious freedom) had been influential in the Holy See's decision to move forward with Vietnam. Vietnam's accession to the WTO was also important. Post will report further on January 29 after meeting relevant Vatican officials.
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